United States Department of the Interior

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area
401 West Hillcrest Drive
Thousand Oaks, California 91360-4207

In reply refer to:
July 7, 2003

Al Wright, Executive Director
Wildlife Conservation Board
1807 13th Street, Suite 103
Sacramento, California 95814-7117

Dear Mr. Wright:

As Chief of Planning, Science and Resource Management at the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area and as an ecologist familiar with the ecological concerns facing much of California, I write to you today to highlight some of the superlative ecological values associated with the Ahmanson Ranch property. In particular, I note that without extensive protected parkland in the Simi Hills, including habitats in and around Ahmanson Ranch, we may jeopardize the viability of the parklands already acquired in the Santa Monica Mountains and put at risk a public trust to conserve these resources in perpetuity.

The Ahmanson Ranch includes a large portion of crucial core habitat in the Simi Hills, north of the Santa Monica Mountains and south of the Santa Susana Mountains. Based on studies we and other scientists have conducted over the last several years, we know that the Simi Hills contain abundant wildlife, including mule deer, badgers, bobcats, gray foxes, coyotes, and mountain lions. These species rely on the varying habitat types and resources available throughout the Simi Hills and on the rolling hills and grassy oak savannas of the Ahmanson Ranch. If the Ahmanson Ranch were developed, a substantial portion of this rare and important wildlife habitat would be lost forever.

Of even greater concern for regional wildlife persistence, though, is that the Ahmanson Ranch is situated within one of the most important wildlife habitat linkages in southern California. The long-term persistence of wildlife in the Santa Monica Mountains and Simi Hills, particularly large carnivores such as bobcats, badgers, and mountain lions, will depend on their ability to move to and from these two mountain ranges via a habitat linkage in the Simi Hills. The single most important connection for wildlife moving between the Santa Monica Mountains and Simi Hills exists along a stretch of the 101 Freeway near the communities of Agoura Hills and Calabasas. The Ahmanson Ranch is situated directly in the path of this linkage, specifically along the connection route between the Santa Monica and Santa Susana Mountains.

If the Ahmanson Ranch were developed, the viability of this connection would be significantly constrained. In particular, the linkage area that connects the central Santa Monica Mountains via Crummer, Las Virgenes, and Liberty Canyons will be severely limited. Animal movement, if it occurs, would be confined to the much narrower linkage provided through Cheeseboro and upper Las Virgenes Canyons, with no guarantees that this would be sufficient. Because of uncertainties inherent in the science of ecology, the precise consequences of the loss of Ahmanson Ranch are difficult to exactly predict. We do know, however, that such a large-scale development and its resulting habitat loss will definitely have major impacts on the ecosystem. These impacts will not only be felt in the Simi Hills, but also in the surrounding Santa Monica and Santa Susana Mountains.

Despite this sobering assessment, it is also important to emphasize the current Simi Hills/Santa Monica Mountains/Santa Susana Mountains complex is one of the most diverse and ecologically important areas in southern California. The Simi Hills serve as the center of this complex and the stepping stone between the adjacent mountain ranges. Within the Simi Hills, our research demonstrates that relatively large populations of bobcats and other carnivores can exist, and that mountain lions do roam freely between the Santa Susana Mountains and Simi Hills, and in and around the Ahmanson Ranch property. Indeed, just this week we documented movement of a young male mountain lion from adjacent national park land into the Ahmanson Ranch. Clearly these animals are using the high quality habitats afforded in the Simi Hills and Ahmanson Ranch, and depend on these areas for their dispersal across the region.

Independent of connectivity values, the Ahmanson Ranch itself represents important unique habitats that include rare oak savanna woodlands and grasslands. These habitats provide foraging habitat for mammalian carnivores but also support an incredibly diverse array of raptors. Indeed, the Simi Hills contain habitat for 13 species of breeding raptors and recent surveys by NPS biologists confirm that healthy raptor populations persist in the area. Stream surveys by NPS biologists have also shown that water quality remains high in the natural areas of the Simi Hills, including in upper Las Virgenes Canyon adjacent to Ahmanson Ranch. Perhaps it is not surprising that the last remaining population of red-legged frogs in the region was discovered on Ahmanson Ranch. All told, the Simi Hills overall and the Ahmanson Ranch in particular represent outstanding ecological treasures. These values are substantially increased when considered with the habitat connectivity roles of the Simi Hills and Ahmanson Ranch.

In summary, the Ahmanson Ranch represents an extremely valuable and diverse habitat area supporting many species of wildlife. These species depend on Ahmanson Ranch for foraging and hunting, but most importantly for connectivity to other areas within the Simi Hills and to the Santa Monica and Santa Susana Mountains. The tremendous public investments already made to protect habitats in the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area (and the efforts now underway in the Santa Susana Mountains) must also be considered. As mentioned before, without extensive protected parkland in the Simi Hills, including habitats in and around Ahmanson Ranch, we will further jeopardize the viability of the parklands already acquired and risk a public trust to conserve these resources in perpetuity.

If you would like additional information or background about our studies in the Simi Hills, please feel free to contact me directly at 805-370-2339 or via email at *ray_sauvajot@nps.gov*.

Sincerely,

Raymond M. Sauvajot, Ph.D.

Chief of Planning, Science and Resource Management
and Adjunct Assistant Professor of Biology at UCLA and CSUN